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SUBJECT: BOSNIA GETS SINGLE OMBUDSMAN INSTITUTION

¶1. On April 3, Bosnia's state-level Parliament adopted the law establishing a single Ombudsman institution composed of three members (a chairman and two deputies). The members will likely represent BiH's three constituent peoples (Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats), although theoretically members of national minorities (Roma, Jewish, Albanian etc.) could be appointed. The new law abolishes the existing plethora of similar offices by year's end. According to the new law, the Ombudsmen will be appointed by Parliament for a six-year term, with the chairman position rotating every two years.

¶2. The new Ombudsmen will be selected by an ad hoc commission within the state Parliament, and both houses will confirm the appointment. The law also requires that the existing Ombudsmen institutions reduce their staff by 30 percent and field offices by 50 percent. The new institution would then absorb the remaining staff and assets at the end of the year.

COMMENT

¶3. After a number of delays, changes, and various political gambits, BiH will finally have a single Ombudsman institution. The current state-level Ombudsmen, although not known for effective human rights advocacy, fought hard but unsuccessfully to extend their current mandate--despite shaky credentials. For example, the current Serb member of the state Ombudsmen, Vitomir Popovic, is now on trial for racketeering, and served as a Vice Premier in the wartime government of then-RS President Radovan Karadzic. The streamlining of the Ombudsmen's institution is long overdue; we hope that Parliamentarians after the October 2006 elections will select people who are not tainted by the past and who will advocate forcefully for the citizens they represent.

MCELHANEY